DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 848 JC 020 582

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|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Ding, Anning |
| TITLE | China's Vocational Universities. ERIC Digest. |
| INSTITUTION | ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges, Los Angeles, CA. |
| SPONS AGENCY | Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC. |
| REPORT NO | EDO-JC-02-03 |
| PUB DATE | 2002-03-00 |
| NOTE | 4p. |
| CONTRACT | ED-99-CO-0010 |
| AVAILABLE FROM | For full text: http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/ERIC/ digests.html. Tel: 800-832-8256 (Toll Free). |
| PUB TYPE | ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073) |
| EDRS PRICE | EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Access to Education; Community Colleges; *Educational Change; Educational Development; Educational Innovation; Foreign Countries; Industrial Education; *Job Training; *Nontraditional Education; Two Year Colleges; *Vocational Education |
| IDENTIFIERS | *China |

ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest describes the development and characteristics of vocational universities (VUs) in China. In response to the demand for increased numbers of trained technical workers in the 1980's, VUs developed and the higher vocational education system in China was reformed. Currently, 101 vocational universities are in existence in China. These institutions focus their curricula on occupational and technical programs--such as optometry, nursing and industrial arts--and offer sub-baccalaureate degrees similar to American community colleges. Students enrolling in vocational universities are high school graduates who have taken the nationwide higher education entrance exam. Often, those students who may have scored lower on the entrance exam will seek education at a VU. This digest also covers topics of faculty, local governance, and funding of vocational universities. It concludes with a discussion of the difficulties these institutions face, including: ambiguity in leadership, limited funding, and discrimination because of the low status vocational education has within the Chinese higher education system. In recent years, the Ministry of Education has started new policies to expand higher vocational education beyond VUs. Certain adult institutions, junior colleges and four-year colleges now also offer vocational education as part of their curriculum. (Contains 13 references.) (JCC)

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March, 2002

EDO-JC-02-03

# China's Vocational Universities

By Anning Ding

Non-traditional and non-university postsecondary institutions emerged in late 19th century and expanded rapidly around the world in the second half of the 20th century. In China these institutions are known as workers colleges, junior colleges, and two-year vocational universities (Cohen, 1993). Workers colleges are adult higher education institutions with limited programs for current employees, and junior colleges have special short-cycle programs in the technical and engineering fields (Kong and Gimmestad, 1999). The vocational university (VU) is a new type of regular institution that resembles the American community college to some extent, providing sub-baccalaureate degree programs (Williams, 1988). This review will highlight major features of the development of VUs in China since 1980, including the role of VUs in the reform of China's higher education structure, and the characteristics and issues unique to VUs.

## Modernization and Higher Education Reform in China

Before 1980 the higher education system in China had a two-tier structure in terms of national and provincial jurisdiction. China's modernization program started in the late 1970s, and the birth of vocational universities at the city level was a consequence of the "reform and opening" policy that was part of this modernization (Dai, 1991a; Dai 1991b; Fang, 1991; Topic Research Group, 1991). In the dramatic transformation from planning economy to market-oriented economy, new industries and business boomed, and they required trained personnel to fill job positions at the intermediate level and in the localities (Cheung, 1996). Under the unified planning system, neither the national nor the provincial institutions would consider these job position needs. As a result the city governments responded to the demand by developing city VUs.

## Growth and Development of VUs

In the ten years from 1980 to 1990, 114 VUs were established in China (Topical Research Group, 1991). Jinling VU in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province and Jianghan VU in Wuhan, Hubei Province were among the first VUs in China. Enrollment in VUs increased from 27,331 in 1983 to 72,449 in 1990. From 1985 to 1990 VUs supplied 121,905 graduates to local industry and businesses where no college graduates were assigned previously from national or provincial governments (Dai, 1991a; Topic Research Group, 1991). From 1990 to 2000, the number of the VUs was reduced due to the reorganization of the higher education structure. Some VUs were merged into other regular institutions. Yet the enrollment has continued to grow. In 1998 101 VUs were reported (MOE, 2000).

## VUs: A New Type of Higher Education Institution

The VUs possess some unique features that differ from other Chinese higher education institutions (Huang, 1984; Dai, 1991a; Topic Research Group, 1991). All VUs are locally administered and primarily financed at the city level, with comprehensive curricular and short-cycle programs that are vocational and technical in nature.

### *Programs*

The VUs offer a wide range of more than 200 programs that are closely linked to local industry and business needs, leading to a sub-baccalaureate degree that can not be gained at a different type of institution (Topic Research Group, 1991). Some "hot" applied programs at VUs include optometry, tour guide, horticulture, industrial arts and crafts, commodity inspection and maintenance, and advanced nursing (Topic Research Group, 1991). In addition, many VUs offer non-credit programs for adult students (employees).

### *Students*

The VUs enroll local high school graduates for degree programs who pay fees and commute to school. Admission is based on a nationwide entrance exam. Normally VU students have lower scores than those who are admitted into provincial and national institutions. Unlike those who attend a provincial or national institution, a job is not assigned to a VU student at graduation.

### *Faculty*

According to the Topic Research Group (1991), knowledge of a particular field and demonstrated applied skill in that field are the required dual qualifications of faculty members at a VU. Most VUs found it difficult to recruit enough qualified full-time faculty, so they employ part-time faculty members, who usually focus on practical skill training. A ratio of 2/3 full-time faculty and 1/3 part-time faculty was suggested.

### *Funding*

Funding for the VUs comes from various sources (Topic Research Group, 1991). Annual appropriation from the city governments based on student head count is the major source of funding for VUs. In 1987 value RMB1,000.00 (US$210.00) was provided per student. Tuition and fees

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were collected at RMB80.00 (US$17.00) per student per year for the students of liberal arts and at RMB100.00 (US $21.00) for the students of science and engineering. Student fees are roughly about one-month's salary of an ordinary worker. Other non-regular financial support comes from business sectors, overseas Chinese and international organizations. VUs depend on individuals for donations of books, instruments, equipment, and teaching material. Finally, funds generated from providing training services to local enterprises are a growing source of support.

**Difficulties in the Development of VUs**

As discussed in the Chinese literature, the VUs encountered problems and difficulties as they developed (Dai, 1991a, 1991b; Topic Research Group, 1991; Zhang, 1991). Under the centralized system China's higher education institutions must follow the mandatory and restrictive instructions from the central government. In the early years the VUs received unclear or no guidance and policy from the central government. This often resulted in confusion for the leadership of the VUs and the city governments. Due to their lower status in the system and to the traditional ideology about vocationalism, the VUs were discriminated against by people at large. Many did not consider the VUs as higher education since the traditional expectation was that higher education would lead to advancement into higher official ranks. Limited funding and resources impeded the role of the VUs. Faculty had limited knowledge about the nature of the VU and had little or no experience in teaching in such types of institutions. Problems in handling the internal management were common causes of frustration. Many VUs in their earlier stages tried to imitate the pattern of other regular institutions (Dai, 1991a; Topic Research Group, 1991), which enjoyed much more prestige and reputation.

**Vocational Universities and Higher Vocational Education**

Starting in 1996 the central authority of education began to exercise more power in regularizing the administration of higher vocational education institutions, of which VUs are a part (Xue, 2001). In 1998 the Ministry of Education (MOE) issued a new policy to expand higher vocational education beyond the VUs. Higher vocational education programs were then allowed at adult institutions and junior colleges. Four-year universities were permitted to establish vocational colleges within their own institutions, and non-governmental institutions were also encouraged to provide vocational education. In governance, many higher education administrative powers were decentralized to the provincial governments. This included permission to establish new higher vocational institutions, approval of the curriculum and the programs, decisions on the quota of new entrants, and the arrangement of entrance examinations.

By late 1990s the higher vocational education system in China began to take shape. On May 31, 2001 the MOE (2001) released the third list of 85 new vocational colleges approved by provincial governments. Many were converted from adult institutions. Some were upgraded from secondary vocational and technical schools. A few were affiliated with key national universities. In addition non-governmental vocational institutions emerged.

**Conclusion**

China's city VUs developed in response to the modernization and local economic development that began to take place in 1980. Such non-traditional postsecondary institutions diversified the Chinese higher education system and contributed to the formation of higher vocational education. Like many U.S. community colleges used to be before local funding was depleted, the VUs are funded locally and are non-university institutions offering short-cycle, vocational and technical programs at the sub-baccalaureate level for high school graduates and adults.

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-99-CO-0010. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.





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